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There were two things that Asuna, the rapier-wielder who was the sub-leader of the guild, Knights of the Blood, and nicknamed «The Flash», poured her passion into, even though they had no direct benefits for the clearing of the death game, SAO.

One was «cooking». Raising its proficiency level was extremely troublesome and it wasn't like being able to make delicious dishes increased your survivability in dungeons—there are food that gave a temporary boost to one's status or resistance, however—which resulted in Asuna not knowing of any other players among the swordsman classes who completed their cooking skill.

And the other was not a skill. It wasn't an item or a quest either. It was the moment of utmost bliss when she could soak in hot water, up to her shoulders, and let loose her body and heart, or in other words, «a bath».

Her home in the main city of the sixty-first floor, Salemburg, had a bathroom with a bathtub, even if it was small, and she had an exhaustive list of sleeping quarters that included large bath-houses on every floor, for times when she felt the desire for a bigger bath.

And that was how Asuna was, but she couldn't help but to have second thoughts when she bought newly discovered bath-related information from the information broker, Argo, the other day. She wanted to go. She absolutely wanted to go. However, her rationality threw the brakes on that this particular time. That was because that bath existed outside the area of the Anti-Criminal Code and to make things worse, it didn't even have any solid walls surrounding it, a so-called «open-air bath».

There was no point in not removing all equipment when entering a bath. But the fact that it was outside the area meant that attacks from monsters were a given, with the possibility of orange players as well. Weapons, at the very least, could be placed right beside the bathtub for immediate response, but it was necessary to manipulate various windows to equip armor. Above all else, there was no way she could enter the bath and relax while on the guard against attacks.

—And Asuna grumbled so to her close friend, Lisbeth, a blacksmith, on the afternoon of 1st October, 2024.

While putting Asuna's beloved sword, Lambent Light, against the sharpening wheel, Lisbeth thought for a bit, but submitted a proposal with a smug smile before long.

“.....Hahhhh... this is the best.....”

And Lisbeth let out a comment that couldn't possibly be more lethargic, something Asuna thoroughly agreed with.

“Certainly, this must be the second best I've entered in Aincrad.”

“That's kind of contradictory. Where was the best?”

She replied Lisbeth, who turned around with a splash, while smiling.

“I guess it really must have been on the first floor, the time I first entered a bath.”

“Aah, I know, right! I didn't know Aincrad had baths at the start.”

“Hehe, me too.”

Nodding, the slightly cloudy, hot water dripped down from between her fingers.

The open-air bath, which was at the exact coordinates the information described, was far more authentic than Asuna expected. The bathtub surrounded by rocks was slightly inclined and a lavish stream of hot water gushed out from uphill, flowing down without moderation. Beyond the plain wooden fence surrounding the bathtub was the foliage of trees turning bright-red and an unobstructed blue sky, as the outer circumference was nearby. It was practically the same as a free-flowing natural hot spring.

Asuna’s rapier and Lisbeth’s mace were placed on the nearby rocks as a minimum level of protection, but the pair was fully unequipped aside from that. Thinking about it, it was the first time she entered a bath with someone else—or in the first place, it was the first time she was seeing another’s avatar stark naked. Lisbeth turned her body up the moment she realized that, so Asuna unconsciously stared at her.

Noticing her gaze, Lisbeth grinned with a slight blush.

“What’s with that perverted gaze, Asuna?”

“Eh, th-that’s not it, I didn’t mean it that way, erm... I just thought you looked pretty and...”

“What, is that supposed to be sarcasm!? Sure, you have a slender waist, but still!”

Squeezed by the two hands that suddenly reached out and caught hold of her waist, Asuna twisted her body.

“Ahaha, h-hey, that tickles!”

“That would be because I’m tickling you!”

They made a ruckus with the water splashing around for a while, before fully stretching out their arms and legs once again, next to each other. Over half of the bathtub was still free, even with those two as they were.

According to the information Asuna bought, this open-air bath was a key spot of a certain quest and it seems that that would be an assault from a mysterious ninja squad here by proceeding onwards with the story. Of course, she wasn’t concerned over that at the moment, but the possibility of monsters, unrelated to the quest, or players attacking still remained, like she fretted over at the start.

However, Asuna, and probably Lisbeth as well, couldn’t be any more relaxed with their entire bodies in the hot bath. That was because they were protected by something more reliable than any sort of weapon or armor.

A gentle autumn breeze brushed against the water surface, the steam lightly hung over it.

In that moment, a terrific sneeze could be heard beyond the wooden door heading out. Following that, a miserable voice.

“Erm~, do you think it would be possible for us to switch in just a little more~~?”

Meeting Lisbeth's glance, they both giggled before Asuna called back to the one she believed to be the strongest among the clearing group—which would make him the strongest among all of the players—that black-haired, one-handed sword user.

“Another ten minutes, please!”

Without missing a beat, Lisbeth added on.

“No, make that twenty!”